

Adoptable Afghan Customs or Practices in a Military Operations Environment

**A Monograph
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ABSTRACT

ADOPTABLE AFGHAN CUSTOMS OR PRACTICES IN A MILITARY OPERATIONS ENVIRONMENT by MAJ Maurice V. Poitras, Canadian Army, 46 pages.

Cultural awareness is a force multiplier; failure to recognize this can have adverse impacts on operations. Since the first coalition troop deployments to Afghanistan after the events of 9/11, the U.S. Army has received much criticism over the lack of cultural preparedness of its troops. Soldiers at all levels need to demonstrate cultural awareness and cultural understanding in order to avoid alienating and making new enemies among the local population. The U.S. Armed Forces acknowledged the importance when it opened the Marine Corps Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning in Quantico, Virginia in 2005 and the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command Culture Center at Fort Huachuca, Arizona in 2006. It also established the Human Terrain System and began deploying Human Terrain Teams to Afghanistan and Iraq in the fall of 2006. Composed primarily of cultural specialists such as civilian anthropologists and cultural analysts, these teams augment the cultural awareness and cultural understanding at the tactical and operational levels for the U.S. combat brigades.

Coalition troops (including Special Forces groups) deployed to Afghanistan have found that by adopting certain aspects of Afghan culture, such as learning the language, adopting the Afghan notion of time and using Afghan methods of communication, they can more easily decrease tensions, stimulate the exchange of communication, and build cultural bonds with the local population. This monograph will elaborate on these and other attempts to honor local Afghan cultural customs and/or symbols, through adoption in a military operations environment. As a secondary question, and given the measures taken to increase the cultural awareness training given to troops deploying to Afghanistan, it will also assess whether or not current U.S. pre-deployment cultural awareness training is sufficient to break the culture barrier with local Afghan military and civilian personnel, thereby allowing for a full and effective partnership.

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INTRODUCTION

In their efforts to combat the Global War on Terror, various nations have provided troops to Afghanistan since the terrorist attacks on the U.S. of September 11, 2001. Despite coalition successes in taking down the Taliban regime the situation has evolved into an insurgency, where coalition troops now fight hardened Afghan insurgents, who benefit from safe-havens through the porous borders with Pakistan and Iran, and are reinforced by Islamic jihadists from other Muslim countries.

Counterinsurgency experts agree that the strategic center of gravity in counterinsurgency operations lies with the hearts and minds of the local population. To succeed in winning the hearts and minds of the people, is to succeed in isolating the insurgents from their base of support (intelligence, recruitment, supply, weapons, etc.) which eventually leads to the fall of the insurgency. The U.S. Army's Field Manual (FM) 3-24 on Counterinsurgency states: "the ability to generate and sustain popular support, or at least acquiescence and tolerance, often has the greatest impact on the insurgency's long-term effectiveness. This ability is usually the insurgency's center of gravity."¹

History is replete with examples of civilian and military personnel deploying to assist the peoples of foreign nations, but often with a lack of knowledge concerning that nation's culture or identity. "In both Malaya and Vietnam, civilian administrators and military forces struggled with the lack of culturally and linguistically trained personnel. After Generals Templer and Abrams took command in the respective areas of responsibility, they ensured, as much as possible, relevant training promulgated down to the lowest levels."²

¹ _____, *FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency*. Washington DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2006.

² Joseph C. McAlexander, "Hearts and Minds: Historical Counterinsurgency Lessons to Guide the War of Ideas in the Global War of Terrorism," US Air Command and Staff College, Wright Flyer Paper, no.29, (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 2007): 15.

Despite the lessons learned during previous counterinsurgency operations and the incorporation of cultural awareness training prior to deployments, most coalition troops deploying to Afghanistan in the early 2000s, were ill equipped culturally to work with and among the locals. Incidents such as soldiers displaying the wrong hand signals, troops attempting to talk to or troops looking directly at Afghan women, leaders using the wrong (left) hand for greetings or eating, military interventions in domestic disputes, and others, have all had significant impacts on coalition operations, sometimes with detrimental effects. The misplaced actions of a single soldier on patrol can even lead to strategic failure, hence the term “strategic corporal”, a term originally coined by General Charles C. Krulak in a Marines Magazine article.

Cultural awareness is a force multiplier; failure to recognize this can have adverse impacts on operations. Soldiers at all levels need to demonstrate cultural awareness and cultural understanding in order to avoid alienating and making new enemies among the local population. Not only will cultural awareness facilitate interaction with the locals, it will help gain a better understanding of the enemy and how to deal with him: “Understanding an adversary requires more than intelligence from three-letter agencies and satellite photos; it requires an understanding of their interests, habits, intentions, beliefs, social organizations, and political symbols—in other words, their culture. An American soldier can liken culture to a minefield: dangerous ground that, if not breached, must be navigated with caution, understanding, and respect.”³

The U.S. Marine Corps (USMC), building on its experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq, established the Marine Corps Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL) in Quantico, Virginia in 2005. Similarly, in 2006, the U.S. Army opened the doors of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Culture Center (TCC) at Fort Huachuca, Arizona,

³ William D. Wunderle, “Through the Lens of Cultural Awareness: A Primer for U.S. Armed Forces Deploying to Arab and Middle Eastern Countries,” (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006): 3.

in order to provide cultural training to units and Mobile Training Teams deploying to Iraq and Afghanistan. However, these centers teach only rudimentary language and cultural skills without focusing on deep cultural differences and focus very little on the adoption of Afghan customs or practices for use in a military operations environment. Further, not all units receive the same type or the same amount of cultural awareness training. The main effort is devoted to those organizations undertaking deployments with constant daily contact with the local populations and Afghan security forces, such as the MTT teams, the border patrol teams, the Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams, etc.

Recently, the U.S. Army has created the Human Terrain System (HTS) and has been deploying Human Terrain Teams (HTT) to Afghanistan and Iraq. Composed primarily of cultural specialists such as civilian anthropologists and cultural analysts, the role of these teams is to augment and assist combat brigades in increasing their level of cultural awareness and cultural understanding at the tactical and operational levels. The Army deployed five HTT to Iraq and Afghanistan in 2006; this number has increased significantly since then and the demand is increasing for HTT outside of Iraq and Afghanistan. Beginning in 2008, requests for HTT have even been coming in from the U.S. Army's new Africa Command (AFRICOM).

While knowledge of the local language and culture are huge assets, some coalition troops (including Special Forces groups) deployed to Afghanistan have found that the simple fact of sporting a beard further assists them in their interactions with the locals and in breaking the cultural divide. This is not surprising, given an Islamic culture where facial hair is a sign of maturity and wisdom. For health and discipline issues however, the practice is highly controversial, especially with the senior army leadership of the various participating countries. Other practices, such as eating and living among the locals also assists in decreasing tensions, in stimulating the exchange of communication, and in building cultural bonds between counterinsurgent troops and the local population. However, these efforts are less effective,

potentially even counterproductive, when soldiers ignore other local customs and practices when breaking bread with locals and influential tribal leaders.

Obviously, tour lengths have a significant impact on the counterinsurgents' ability to break these cultural barriers. The process requires time, understanding, and friendship building. Because operational requirements often dictate specific timelines for troop deployments, it is also possible that counterinsurgents units see themselves moving constantly from one area to the next, never staying in one area for an extended period. This is far from ideal, and often does not allow sufficient time for them to develop bonds with the locals. Only now that many of these same coalition troops are returning for their second, third or more counterinsurgency tour in Afghanistan, does it appear that they are culturally prepared to face difficulties inherent in understanding the local customs and practices.

Since the first coalition troop deployments to Afghanistan after the events of 9/11, the U.S. Army has received much criticism over the lack of cultural preparedness of its troops. The topic has received wide attention through the media, magazine articles, and even various political bodies.⁴ The issue has helped to give rise to the USMC CAOCL and the U.S. Army's TCC. These centers provide quality cultural awareness training to American troops deploying to war-torn Afghanistan. However, there are indications that the cultural awareness training is insufficient and possibly even irrelevant. Some leaders feel that other unit priorities are taking away time possibly spent on learning the basics of Pashtu or the complexities of Afghan methods of communication.

This monograph will elaborate on these and other attempts to honor local Afghan cultural customs and/or symbols, through adoption in a military operations environment. It will

⁴ Ike Skelton and Jim Cooper, "You're Not From Around Here, Are You?" *Joint Force Quarterly* 36 (2004): 12; Dr. Montgomery McFate, JD., PhD., Speaking for The Importance of Socio-Cultural Knowledge to the U.S. Military on July 9, 2008, before the House Armed Services Committee, Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee, U.S. House of Representatives, 110th Congress, 2nd Session.

show which aspects of Afghan culture, if adopted, can assist counterinsurgents in breaking down the culture barrier and help to win the hearts and minds of the people. As a secondary question, and given the measures taken to increase the cultural awareness training given to troops deploying to Afghanistan, this monograph will also assess whether or not current U.S. pre-deployment cultural awareness training is sufficient to break the culture barrier with local Afghan military and civilian personnel, thereby allowing for a full and effective partnership. The following section will cover the methodology used to answer both questions relevant to this monograph.

METHODOLOGY

The focus of the research for this monograph is Afghan centric, with some research material emerging from the current coalition deployments in Afghanistan, under the International Security Assistance Force and the U.S. led OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM. The research also focused on the adoption of Afghani cultural customs and or symbols from the perspective of the soldier on the ground, not from a headquarters or staff planner's viewpoint. This monograph, therefore, seeks to provide information and recommendations useful to the soldier, leader or military advisor on the ground in dealing with local Afghani customs. It does not address aspects of cultural awareness or understanding that may assist in planning military operations.

Because this paper attempts to answer two related questions on Afghan culture, the research followed two slightly different paths. Firstly, concerning the question of adoptable Afghan customs, the main methodology focused on a comparison of books, interviews, weblogs and online articles and forums. The aim was to identify aspects of Afghan culture that if adopted, could benefit military forces, that is, Western cultured counterinsurgents, in a military operations environment. Though numerous volumes exist on Afghan culture and Western culture, there are relatively few works written on the interactions between them. The research therefore focused on sources written by Westerners or Westernized Afghans (a native Afghan who grew up or was educated in the West, and who returned to Afghanistan at a later stage in his or her life.) The aim was to glean aspects of Afghan culture that these Westerners embraced and whose adoption by coalition forces could assist them in breaking cultural barriers with the local population. The cultural customs that appeared most frequently in the various works were those retained. Weblogs, newspaper, magazines and military journals were similarly helpful in identifying the benefits and or disadvantages of adopting these customs in a military operations environment.

To assess whether or not current U.S. Army cultural awareness pre-deployment training for operations in Afghanistan is relevant and sufficient, various comments and statements relating to the pre-deployment cultural awareness training by recently deployed military members were compiled and compared in order to produce data tables. Predominant sources were military interviews and after action reviews (AAR) from units returning from Afghanistan. Recent interviews, conducted by the Combat Studies Institute in Fort Leavenworth, KS, with military members with recent deployments to Afghanistan were also an invaluable source. For visual depiction, a few graphical tables helped to adequately portray U.S. army members' perception of whether or not they received sufficient training, and their recommendations for future training for follow on troops.

Before addressing the literature review, this paper has certain limitations. This monograph will not address the history of Afghanistan nor will it go into the very detailed notions of Afghan culture, such as the ethnic, tribal, and religious diversities prevalent in Afghanistan. These topics have already been the subject of numerous volumes. Pashtu is the predominant language in Afghanistan and the Pashtun tribe is the predominant one. Therefore, much of this monograph will focus on their dealings, especially in their interactions with coalition forces.

This work does not advocate "going native", that is, for counterinsurgent forces to attempt to imitate Afghans in their daily life. The fact of the matter is that Afghans have a long history of recurring invasions. Consequently, they are very wary of foreigners. For counterinsurgents to try and "go native" would only arouse suspicion among them. Rather, counterinsurgents should learn to appreciate the Afghans for who they are in order to develop bonds of friendship and to win their trust. Only by appreciating the cultural differences will counterinsurgents be able to break the cultural divide and gain the Afghans' respect.

This monograph is similarly not about Western cultured counterinsurgents trying to impose their culture on the Afghan population. In William M. Darley's article, the author advocates defeating the enemy by "changing the culture that sustains him"⁵. The United States Joint Forces Command publication, *The Joint Operational Environment: The World Through 2030 and Beyond*, similarly supports Darley's idea of the necessity in influencing and manipulating elements of another society's culture.⁶ This idea is flawed. It borders on the unethical, and would be next to impossible because of Afghanistan's cultural diversities and societal complexities. Rather, this monograph aims at providing certain aspects of Afghan culture that counterinsurgents can adopt to assist them in their mission. There are, however, indications that outside influences are affecting Afghan culture. One reason for this is the Soviet-Afghan war of 1979-89 which, according to Haroun Mir, was the reason that "more than five million Afghans have sought refuge in the neighbouring countries. The majority of young Afghan refugees have grown up in Iran and Pakistan and have adopted the culture of their host countries... The majority of Kabulis who have returned to the country after long years of exile feel alienated... Today, in this era of globalisation, it is hard to keep Afghan culture away from foreign influence."⁷ Lieutenant Colonel (LtCol) Michael Slusher stated, "As far as cultural awareness, I

⁵ William M. Darley, "Strategic imperative: The Necessity for Values Operations as Opposed to Information Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan," *Air & Space Power Journal* 21 (Spring 2007): 33-42.

⁶ "The Joint Operational Environment: The World Through 2030 and Beyond." United States Joint Forces Command, Living Draft (May 2007), <http://www.policefuturists.org/pdf/1May07JOE.pdf> (accessed September 7, 2008): 45-46.

⁷ Haroun Mir, "Slipping back to the Taliban," (May 3, 2008), http://www.aopnews.com/opinion/mir_back_taliban.html (accessed Sept 7, 2008). Haroun Mir served as an aide to late Ahmad Shah Massoud, Afghanistan's former defense minister and is the co-founder and deputy director of Afghanistan's Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) headquartered in Kabul, Afghanistan.

think that country [Afghanistan] has had an extensive American presence long enough that the culture is changing or adapting to our presence there.”⁸

Because of the variety of ethnic tribes and ethnicities within Afghanistan, the cultural norms and characteristics vary from one tribe to the next and from one region to the next. Similarly, there are strong cultural differences between the rural and urban populations of Afghanistan because of the economic, social, and political conditions and interactions. Further, foreign immigration and western-educated elites and students returning to their native cities to find work have strongly influenced urban Afghan culture. It is, therefore, common to find Afghans wearing western style clothing such as business suits in the major cities. Although there is a need to take different approaches to each of these different cultural groups, it was outside the scope of this monograph to identify and treat each group differently. Consequently, and though there will be specific comments throughout, this monograph will identify adoptable Afghan cultural aspects by keeping in mind the commonalities between these differing groups.

The next section will consist of a review of the literature examined during the research for this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Because of the bi-focus of this monograph, the research conducted centered on three interrelated themes: general works on counterinsurgencies, works on societal cultures and their interactions, and a review of AARs and interviews conducted with U.S. Army officers returning from Afghanistan.

Initially, and to answer the first question concerning adoptable Afghan customs, the research conducted included some general literature on the subject of counterinsurgency. General

⁸Interview with LtCol Michael Slusher, interview conducted by Laurence Lessard from the Operational Leadership Experiences Project, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, February 16, 2007, 5. LtCol Slusher is a Kansas National Guard member who spent a year in Afghanistan in 2006.

theorists such as Nagl, Galula, Trinquier, Kitson, and others, provided the general framework surrounding these types of military operations. Nagl's work was interesting in that it showed the various organizational cultural differences between the U.S. and British Army in their operations in Vietnam and Malaya respectively. He rightly states that organizational culture greatly affects the way a nation operates in a foreign cultural environment. He also leads us to believe that not all nations are adept, ready, or capable of winning hearts and minds and conducting successful counterinsurgency techniques.⁹ However, since most counterinsurgency specialists agree that the population is the center of gravity in these types of missions, cultural barriers need to be broken if coalition forces are to succeed. The aim of this work however, is not to elaborate on the cultural differences between coalition forces, but to act more as a guide for them all and to assist them in crossing the cultural divide with the Afghan population.

Various authors have written on the depth and types of cultural awareness required for counterinsurgency operations. This monograph will not address these issues, though William D. Wunderle provides some very clear guidelines in his article.¹⁰

Other works reviewed focused on the interactions and sometimes clashes between differing cultures. Samuel P. Huntington, in expounding the realities of global politics, describes an inevitable clash between the Western and the Islamic civilizations.¹¹ The clash he describes however is not one of civilizations, but one of cultures and this clash is avoidable. Huntington's idea of barricading and creating walls between cultures is wrong. Nations should stimulate interaction and understanding between these cultures to avoid future conflicts. Westernized

⁹ John A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 51.

¹⁰ Wunderle, 9-11.

¹¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.), 28.

counterinsurgents should understand the cultural differences of the environment they will ultimately work in to help transcend and bring down cultural barriers if they are to succeed.

Hungtington's work is at the macro level, and does not go into details concerning Islamic or Afghan customs and practices. Louis Dupree's study, though very comprehensive in its study of Afghanistan, its people and its culture, shows little of the interactions with western cultures. Novels by Said Hyder Akbar, Jason Elliot, Anne Seierstad, and Khaled Hosseini were useful to the research. Written mostly from a westerner's point of view, they provided insight in demonstrating the contrasts between western and Afghan culture. They included many references on the advantages in speaking the native language, the wearing of beards, the Afghan code of honor, their methods of communication, their hospitality, and their notions of time. As the core of this paper centers on the interactions between western and Afghan culture, these observations and ideas were all invaluable to this paper.

Various weblogs and web-based articles also provided key information concerning the advantages and disadvantages of adopting Afghan cultural customs. Gil Kaufman's article provides a good example of the benefits of speaking the local language, even by American service members. The Jack Army Blogspot and both Fiona Hamilton and James Brooke's web articles all provided very good information concerning the advantages and disadvantages of coalition and special forces coalition members wearing beards in Afghanistan in their efforts to break down the cultural barriers.

To answer the second portion of the monograph, that is, whether or not current U.S. Army and USMC cultural awareness training is relevant and or sufficient, various sources, mostly AARs and interviews, from U.S. Army members recently deployed to the Afghanistan were accumulated and compared. In March of 2007, the U.S. Army's Center for Company-level Leaders (CCL) at the United Military Academy, West Point, NY published the *Afghan Commander AAR Book*. Based on experiences by military officers deploying to OEF-7

(Operation Enduring Freedom), it is a compilation of interviews of over forty-six company-level officers, mostly majors, who described their experiences in the various provinces of Afghanistan. This source formed the basis for the statistics and comments compiled.

Also researched were electronically filed interviews of U.S. Army service members about their experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq. Conducted by the Combat Studies Institute and held by the Combined Arms Research Library in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, these interviews are part of the Operational Leadership Experiences project to collect and archive firsthand, multi-service accounts from military personnel who planned, participated in and supported operations in the Global War on Terrorism. The interviews pertaining to experiences in Afghanistan proved beneficial in providing information concerning the relevancy and sufficiency of cultural awareness training and revealed some insights into the adoptable Afghan customs.

Barak A. Salmoni's article also provided some useful information as to the evolution of cultural awareness training of the USMC since the beginning of their deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan and the origins of the CAOCL. Barak also detailed five important lessons learned concerning cultural awareness training that all coalition nations should take into account when undergoing their preparatory training prior to deployment to Iraq and or Afghanistan.¹²

¹² Barak A. Salmoni, "Advances in Predeployment Culture Training: the U.S. Marine Corps Approach," *Military Review* (November-December 2006): 82-85.

MAIN BODY

Before addressing the aspects of Afghan culture that counterinsurgent forces should adopt in a military operations environment, this work will first address the benefits of doing so. U.S. Army Retired Colonel (Col) Maxie McFarland, in his article, provides a comprehensive and insightful list of 16 advantages of having culturally literate soldiers in a military operations environment.¹³ Though too numerous to recount, these advantages, more often than not, will assist counterinsurgents in removing the cultural barriers that inhibit a free and open exchange with the locals. They will aid in removing biases, prejudices, and predispositions inherent in both the locals and the counterinsurgents. They will also lead to winning the hearts and minds of the locals, through the establishment of friendly relationships and strong bonds. These relationships can assist counterinsurgents in their work in that they can eventually lead to better sources of intelligence concerning enemy actions or movements, as the locals are often (voluntarily or no) in contact with the enemy. They can also further facilitate the task of providing Security, Stability, Transition, and Reconstruction (SSTR) by laying the framework of communication between the wants and needs of the population and the abilities and resources of the counterinsurgents.

Of note is that not everyone is culturally adept and effectively able to break down cultural barriers. It is therefore up to military leaders to identify those soldiers and officers who display natural abilities in communication, in negotiations, who have propensities towards learning new languages and who do not have strong prejudices or racial biases. As they should be those in constant contact with the locals, these individuals should be the focus of in-depth cultural training. During the Great Sioux War of 1876-77, U.S. Major General George Crook hand-picked his leaders, not only for their abilities on the battlefield, but especially because they

¹³ Maxie McFarland, "Military Cultural Education," *Military Review* (March-April 2005): 63.

were culturally adaptive: “He took care to choose intelligent officers and ‘scattered them through the country to learn it and all the people in it, and particularly the bushwackers, their haunts, etc...Crook discovered that these ‘little secrets of the inner Indian,’ were instrumental to fighting an insurgent opponent with the maximum efficacy and minimum military effort required.”¹⁴

Some military leaders have even suggested selecting and training these culturally attuned individuals early in their career for future use in foreign lands. U.S. Army LtCol Timothy R. Williams recommends identifying culturally adept leaders as early as during their Officer Basic Course, virtually during their first few weeks in the Army.¹⁵

Six possible aspects of Afghan culture were identified that, if adopted, could assist counterinsurgent forces in breaking down cultural barriers with the local Afghan population and military personnel. These are learning the language, adopting the Afghan notion of time, eating and sleeping among Afghans, adopting Afghan methods of communication, and adopting certain aspects of their honor system, more specifically their notion of hospitality. Also considered was the growing of beards for counterinsurgents.

Language

The most important yet arguably the most difficult aspect of Afghan culture that counterinsurgent forces operating in Afghanistan must adopt is the language. Learning a new language is not an easy task and counterinsurgents should focus on training those soldiers and leaders with natural abilities in this discipline. Even those who have no aptitude towards language skills, however, need to learn common greetings such as how to inquire about enemy activities and locations, where to find a certain individual, and others. Having local interpreters is

¹⁴ Wesley M. Pirkle, “Major General George Crook’s use of Counterinsurgency Compound Warfare During the Great Sioux War of 1876-77,” MMAS Thesis, (Fort Leavenworth: U.S. Army Command & General Staff College, 2008) 13, 21.

¹⁵ Timothy R. Williams, “Culture – We Need Some of That!: Cultural Knowledge and Army Officer Professional Development,” USAWC Strategy Research Project, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2006): 11.

definitely an asset when interacting with locals but being able to speak the language, able to comprehend the subtleties, nuances and the context of the dialogue is invaluable.

Counterinsurgents may taken caution as interpreters can also have their own agenda, may be from a rival tribe, may have a negative history with one or more families in the area, or may possibly even be working for the enemy. The benefits of working without such risks are evident.

LtCol Williams stated after his tour “Use of language was my most effective tool in building and maintaining rapport with my Afghan counterparts, and coincidentally, my efforts were not lost on his staff either... Afghans respect those who endeavor to learn their language(s), and as much as possible, we should take the time to do so. This initiative will build bridges and enhance cultural awareness like few other activities can.”¹⁶

Ahmed Shama, a U.S. military member and Arab speaker born in Cairo and recently deployed to Iraq stated that “One of the advantages he had, which helped ‘break the ice’ when he went into Iraqi homes with his Marine compatriots, was his ability to speak Arabic to the local citizens and explain to them what was going on... instead of it having to be an ugly situation where Marines don't speak Arabic ... telling them to move from room to room ... instead, I could speak to them,’ he said, explaining the sense of relief many Iraqis had when they realized that they could communicate in their own language with one of the Marines. ‘By the end of the day, we were sitting there sipping tea with the Iraqis in the house, everybody is relaxing, talking.’”¹⁷

Major Perry Stiemke, a U.S. Army engineer deployed to Paktia province, Afghanistan in the fall of 2006 stated “It was a sign of honor that someone had taken the time to learn their

¹⁶ Scot D. Mackenzie, (LtCol, US Army), “Imperatives for Working with Afghan Security Forces,” USAWC Strategy Research Project, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2008): 10.

¹⁷ Gil Kaufman, “Muslim-American Marine Helps Break Down Cultural, Language Barriers,” (August 8, 2008): 1-2, http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1592474/20080808/id_0.jhtml (accessed Sept 7, 2008).

language and talk to them directly. It made for easier engagements and fostered cooperation when faced with difficult situations, such as searching a home or village.”¹⁸

Learning the language is, therefore, the first and foremost aspect of Afghan culture which if adopted, would unquestionably help counterinsurgents break the culture divide with the Afghans. Of note, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD)’s “Defense Language Transformation Roadmap”, published in January 2005, acknowledges the importance of language training, and expounds goals to increase the language proficiency skills of DOD members and to provide a surge capacity for DOD.¹⁹ The U.S. Army has also purchased a corporate license for Rosetta Stone, a language learning software, which is available online for all DOD military and civilian with access to the Army Knowledge Online (AKO) website. Further, the Defense Language Institute provides pocket-sized basic language Survival Guides as well as language training packages in several different languages including Pashtu or Dari and are available at www.dliflc.edu. These and similar actions indicate the Army’s acknowledgement of the importance in the ability of its members to speak the local language in counterinsurgency operations.

Living with locals

The second aspect of Afghan culture that counterinsurgents should adopt is the Afghan lifestyle, for example, by eating and living among and like the locals. Galula’s work reinforces this idea. The author discourages building walled compounds for the troops, similar to the Forward Operating Bases (FOB) coalition forces currently operate from in Afghanistan. He reasons that counterinsurgents “become attached to their barracks and thus be reluctant to move

¹⁸ “Afghan Commander AAR Book (OEF-7)”, CompanyCommand.army.mil forum product, published by U.S. Army’s Center for Company-level Leaders, (United States Military Academy: West Point, NY, March 2007): 142.

¹⁹ “Defense Language Transformation Roadmap,” Department of Defense document, <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Mar2005/d20050330roadmap.pdf> (accessed February 17, 2009).

to less comfortable billets. It is also human that soldiers living in barracks would always appear to the population as outsiders, as people apart. If no construction other than what is strictly necessary is allowed, the counterinsurgent forces will be forced to live like the population, in shacks if necessary, and this will help to create common bonds.”²⁰ By living among and like the locals, counterinsurgents are not acting like an occupying force, but as someone who is genuinely interested in the Afghans, their culture and their way of life. This practice also affords the locals some measure of security to their daily lives. Counterinsurgents should build rapports with them, should strive to become familiar with the historical relations between the tribes, ethnic groups, and villages in the area. They should identify the influential tribes and local leaders, the resources they have, their allies and enemies. They should come to understand their cultural norms, and understand the culture’s narrative.²¹ Only by living with and building a rapport with the local population can the counterinsurgents come to understand the local culture’s narrative. Once counterinsurgents understand the sources and impacts of the grievances of the locals, they can relate to them. It then becomes a personal battle to help them get through the struggle and find a solution to their problems.²² Counterinsurgents should however be wary, as many Afghans often change loyalties to suit their family or tribal needs and will not hesitate to use their influence with the counterinsurgents to settle family or village feuds or even personal vendettas.

Galula recommends staying and living with the locals until the counterinsurgents have been able to break down the cultural barriers: “the turning point really comes when leaders have emerged from the population and have committed themselves on the side of the counterinsurgent.

²⁰ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (St. Petersburg, FL: Hailer Publishing, 2005), 113.

²¹ _____, *FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency*. 3-8. FM 3-24 defines the cultural narrative as “a story recounted in the form of a causally linked set of events that explains an event in a group’s history and expresses the values, character, or self-identity of the group. Narratives are the means through which ideologies are expressed and absorbed by members of a society.”

²² McAlexander, 21.

They can be counted on because they have proved their loyalty in deeds and not in words, and because they have everything to lose from a return of the insurgents.”²³ For many coalition members, an indication that they had successfully broken the culture barrier was when a local Afghan man would present them his most prized possession, his family members (mainly children), to the counterinsurgents, thereby displaying the utmost trust.²⁴

U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan have recently utilized this practice in the past not only to break the culture barrier, but also to win hearts and minds: “We lived in the enemy’s backyard. We did not base our operations out of FOBs [Forward Operating Bases]. We identified key areas and established patrol bases that we lived in the entire deployment. This allowed us to live among the local populace in order to separate the enemy from the people.”²⁵ In some areas, the willingness of troops to live among the people has even caused a significant decline in insurgent presence and activities in the area.²⁶

Historically, the practice of living and eating among the locals is not new. The U.S. III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) in I Corps, under the command of Major General Lew Walt, used similar tactics in Vietnam from 1965 to 1971. Using the USMC’s organization and history in small wars, Walt sent small rifle squads of Marines to the hamlets to live, work, and help the local populations under the Combined Action Program (CAP). These units were highly successful in building strong bonds with the locals hence in breaking down the culture barrier and in decreasing insurgent activities. Unfortunately however, efforts to implement the program

²³ Galula, 82.

²⁴ This author had a similar experience during his deployment to Afghanistan in 2004.

²⁵ Afghan Commander AAR Book (OEF-7): 35.

²⁶ Carmen L. Gleason, “U.S. Soldiers Continue to Gain Trust of Afghan People,” *American Forces Press Service News Articles*, U.S. Department of Defense, <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=45944> (accessed October 21, 2008).

theatre wide at the operational level met with resistance, primarily from the U.S. Army's organizational culture.²⁷

In living with the locals, the counterinsurgents will often be in touch with the children. An advantage of dealing with children is that they often do not know when to lie and may provide useful information unknowingly.²⁸ Further, children are usually an easy way to gain access to the other family members. However attracting children by providing foodstuffs and other amenities can have its shortcomings. Children may endanger themselves, as they will often get too close to military vehicles or convoys for more "goodies". Further, the enemy will often not hesitate to use children as sources of information concerning counterinsurgent troop movements, to attack coalition troops as child soldiers, as human shields, or even as unwilling or even unknowing suicide bombers.

Counterinsurgents must consider the following cautions when living among the locals. Firstly, they may be endangering the locals' as the enemy will not hesitate to attack counterinsurgents, whether they live among the locals or not. Secondly, counterinsurgents should not rely on the local food sources if it risks having a detrimental effect on the local economy (lack of food, inflation, etc.) Thirdly, counterinsurgents should understand that many Afghans are likely to sell their food to Westerners for profit, even if it means other families or community members could starve to death. Lastly, Afghan food prepared by Afghans, though usually well prepared, can contain harmful bacteria which can be detrimental to counterinsurgent forces if they have not developed the proper anti-bodies. Said Hyder Akbar recounts how he returned to Afghanistan after having left the country as a very small child. Though he took specific steps to live and eat like the Afghans, he found himself often incapacitated from gastro-intestinal

²⁷ Nagl, 157.

²⁸ Afghan Commander AAR Book (OEF-7): 164.

problems because of the fact that his stomach had not developed the necessary antibodies.²⁹

Living and eating among the locals is, therefore, another aspect of Afghan culture which can assist counterinsurgent or coalition forces in breaking cultural barriers.

Beards

The sporting of beards, especially by Special Operations Forces (SOF) units operating in Afghanistan and Iraq, has sparked much controversy over the last six or seven years. There are advantages and disadvantages to sporting a beard. Historically, all great war leaders wore beards, from the Peloponnesian Wars to the wars of the 1800s. One would have difficulty finding a photograph of any U.S. civil war general without some form of facial hair. Beards displayed not only manhood, but also a position of authority and leadership. This tradition has persisted in Afghanistan where the wisest and most mature members are usually those with the longest and nicest beards. When the Taliban ruled Afghanistan from 1996-2001, they implemented sixteen decrees which they broadcast on Radio Sharia. One of these was a prohibition against shaving: “Anyone who has shaved off or cut his beard will be imprisoned until the beard has grown to the length of a clenched fist.”³⁰ Men without beards were constantly harassed and disciplined. This caused severe problems with some of the Hazara tribes such as the Jaguri, as the men are physically incapable of growing a beard.³¹ Consequently, many Afghans found themselves under constant persecution over the issue of beards during the Taliban’s stay in power.

There are various arguments for wearing beards, however most of these hold up mainly in the Pashtun dominated areas of Afghanistan. Because beards are a sign of maturity and

²⁹ Said Hyder Akbar and Susan Barton, *Come Back to Afghanistan: A California Teenager’s Story* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), 40, 89-93, 179, 215.

³⁰ Asne Seierstad, *The Bookseller of Kabul*, (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2003), 80.

³¹ “The Cyclopædia of India and of Eastern and Southern Asia,” http://www.archive.org/stream/cyclopaediaofind01balfuoft/cyclopaediaofind01balfuoft_djvu.txt (accessed February 22, 2009).

wisdom, counterinsurgents working in these areas are much more prone to see locals Afghans approach them if they are wearing beards than if they are not. British soldiers (Scottish airmen to be precise) who deployed to Kandahar in 2007 and who were permitted to grow beards acknowledged that their facial hair enabled them to command respect from the locals.³² Another reason is that the soldiers appear less effeminate and hence encounter fewer problems in a society where homosexuality rates are higher than in western societies.³³ Another distinct advantage is that counterinsurgents working alongside Afghans, such as with the Afghan National Army (ANA) or Afghan security forces, and who do not sport beards are much more discernible from a distance and hence make easier targets by snipers.

For Afghans, the wearing of beards is an important status symbol. In Said Hyder Akbar's book, the author travelled throughout Afghanistan with his father who had played a role as Hamid Karzai (the current Afghan President's) spokesperson and later as the governor of Kunar province. Akbar's father refused to wear a beard in Afghanistan and stated "But in Afghanistan, beards mean a lot. Many people said the traditional religious people in Kunar would not accept a governor without a beard. Defense Minister Fahim [Khan] was among those who told my father he would not succeed in Kunar without a shaved face. But plenty of others didn't care one way or another about my father's facial hair... the beard lets you get away with a lot here [Afghanistan]. Obviously, it gives you a kind of spiritual standing – a convenient cover for your misdeeds. But it's also like the sweatshirt emblazoned with the name of the state college football team: when you wear it on fall Saturdays, neighbors wave and nod approvingly, 'yes, he's one of us.'"³⁴

³² Hamilton, Fiona, "Permission to shave, sir? No!" *UK Times Online* (September 13, 2007), http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/men/article2442003.ece (accessed September 7, 2008).

³³ This topic will be the subject of further development later on in the paper.

³⁴ Akbar and Barton, 147-8.

A reporter from the Christian Science Monitor found that wearing Afghan clothes and sporting a beard helped him in his travels throughout Khost, a city approximately five hours southeast of Kabul. He had a former Mujahideen freedom fighter during the war against the Soviets as a driver and noted that, “far more important for our safety if we encountered Taliban fighters or sympathizers was the four-inch beard worn by our driver Zalmay. Our interpreter referred to his magnificent barb as our ‘passport’ to travel outside Kabul. Most conservative Muslims follow the teaching that says trim the mustache but allow the beard to grow.”³⁵

There are various counter-arguments to wearing beards; the first of which is that it appears unclean and unhealthy, and that it is contrary to Army regulations (for the U.S. Army, AR 670-1). For many senior leaders, unshaven men in an operational theatre give the impression of a lack of unit discipline. This is a contentious issue with the chain of command, especially as there is a strong perception that SOF elements have too much latitude to “do as they please” in theatre. Secondly, and from a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) member’s perspective, there is the fear that having bearded SOF members who look and dress much like the NGOs (civilian clothes, Afghan scarves, etc.) and who work in the same areas will blur the distinction between combatants and non-combatants and will only draw more enemy fire for the NGO workers.³⁶ Because of the nature of their functions, many SOF members also grow beards in order to pass off as locals, alluding to a comment made earlier. Because of their history of invasions, Afghans are aloofly suspicious of all foreigners. They will accept foreigners much more freely if they are open about who they are, then if they perceive them spies or informants.

³⁵ Ben Arnoldy, “Dressing for Afghan Success,” The Christian Science Monitor, (May 9, 2005) <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0509/p07s01-wosc.html> (accessed Sept 7, 2008). This point does not nullify the fact that NGO’s have always constituted a thoughtful target for enemy fighters such as Al-Qaida.

³⁶ Special Forces Alpha Geek[pseud.], “Either the beard goes, or I do . . .,” The Jack Army Blogspot, (March 26, 2005) <http://sfalphageek.blogspot.com/2005/03/either-beard-goes-or-i-do.html#comments> (accessed September 7, 2008).

Lastly, not all Afghans wear beards. In the major urban centers, it is common to see clean-shaven Afghan men dressed in western business suits.

Therefore, though the issue remains largely a debate, the practice of sporting a beard for counterinsurgents is not a recommended one. There can be some utility of it in rural Pashtun dominated areas, where a beard can confer some form of advantage in relating to the locals and in establishing common bonds and relationships. It does not, however, provide any distinct advantage in urban areas or areas dominated by other Afghan tribes, and the disadvantages far outweigh any perceived advantages.

Honor / hospitality

There is an aspect of the Afghan honor code which if adopted could be beneficial to counterinsurgents in a military operations environment. In Afghanistan, honor is the foundation upon which the society rests. Afghans have a very basic allegiance system which starts internally and radiates outwards. An Afghan's most important sense of duty is towards his immediate family, followed by his extended family, the tribe and villagers and lastly the government.

"Honour is the rock upon which social status rests and the family is the single most important institution in Afghan society. Individual honour, a positive pride in independence that comes from self-reliance, fulfillment of family obligations, respect for the elderly, respect for women, loyalty to colleagues and friends, tolerance for others, forthrightness, an abhorrence fanaticism, and a dislike for ostentation, is a cultural quality most Afghans share."³⁷

The Pashtun, the dominant Afghan tribe, abide by a set of laws known as the *Pashtunwali*, or "*The Way of the Pashtuns*." *Pashtunwali* is a stringent code of honor system that governs the moral and behavioral rules of a large portion, some say up to 40%, of the Afghan population (not surprising, since the Pashtun tribe makes up approximately 42% of the

³⁷ Nancy Hatch Dupree, "Cultural heritage and national identity in Afghanistan," *Third World Quarterly* 23, no. 5, (October 2002): 978.

population.³⁸) *Pashtunwali* is a crucial element in most Afghans' daily lives, whether they are Pashtun or not and the basis for almost all social dealings. There are various interpretations of the *Pashtunwali* system, and various sources differ on the number of tenets it comprises. Most sources describe five or six main tenets.³⁹

The component *Melmastia/mehrmapalineh* accords hospitality to all visitors or guests, regardless of their nationality, race, religion, or ethnicity. *Nanawati* provides asylum to any man seeking refuge or shelter from the enemy. *Badal* is founded on justice or revenge, the right to defend one's honor, to not do so would bring disrespect and shame to the family. *Ghayrat/Tureh/Merannah* denote self-respect, chivalry, and bravery, and the defense of one's property and honor; Afghans pride themselves on their bravery, and more often than not will desire to lead in battle to gain honor for their family. The tenet *Namus* relates to defense of the honor of women and of one's female relatives and homeland.

Counterinsurgents would do well to adopt the tenet *Melmastia* if they are to successfully break down cultural barriers and connect with the locals. Providing hospitality for all Afghans, regardless of their nationality, color, race, ethnicity, or religion can only win favors with the locals. However counterinsurgents should avoid adopting any of the other aspects. For example, *badal* or right of revenge, the tribal code which dictates that the dead man's family members should kill the murderer or another member of his family to exact revenge⁴⁰ would not be an appropriate conduct for counterinsurgents. Described as a never-ending family feud, *Badal* is common throughout Afghanistan, and there have been several indications of these longstanding

³⁸ "Afghanistan," CIA Factbook, U.S. Central Intelligence Agency website, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html#People> (accessed February 19, 2009).

³⁹ Richard Tom Strickland, (Maj, Canadian Army), "The Way of the Pashtun: Pashtunwali," *Canadian Army Journal* 10.3 (Fall 2007): 47-50.

⁴⁰ Akbar and Barton, 46.

grievances throughout the research. That of *nanawati* is also contentious, as counterinsurgents, subject to the rules of war and military code of conduct, would be in a difficult situation if asked to provide asylum for an Afghan man wanted by the law. The notion of hospitality should, however, be encouraged, especially when counterinsurgents are host to meetings and reunions involving other Afghans.

Of interest is the distinction between the terms *shura* and *jirga*. Though both are commonplace meetings of local elders to deal with ‘public’ conflicts, the *shura* is traditionally non-Pashtun, and lacks the “clearly defined rules” of the *jirga*.⁴¹ A small group of Canadians learned this the hard way in March 2006, when they were invited to attend a *shura* with the local elders of a small village in Gumbad, about 70 kilometers north of Kandahar Afghanistan. They mistakenly believed that they were under the protection of the tenet *Melmastia*, and would benefit from local protection during the meeting. Their assumption proved false when an axe-wielding twenty year-old Afghan suddenly turned on them, followed by an attack with small arms fire and a rocket propelled grenade.⁴²

Notion of time

This author, during his tour of duty in Afghanistan in 2004, often heard Afghans say to him, “You have a watch, but I have time.” Afghans have a very different notion of time compared to westerners, because of their culture and lifestyle. They are not rushed by time and financial considerations and for a typical Afghan, what cannot be accomplished today can always be left until tomorrow.

⁴¹ Ali Wardak, “Jirga—A Traditional Mechanism of Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan,” <http://www.institute-for-afghan-studies.org/AFGHAN%20CONFLICT/LOYA%20JIRGA/Jirgabywardak.pdf> (accessed September 29, 2008).

⁴² “Axe attack was an ambush, Canadian military says,” www.cbcnews.ca (March 5, 2006) <http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2006/03/04/canada-afghanistan060304.html> (accessed September 29, 2008).

Western culture on the other hand, is very time oriented. “Time is money”. Being a much more materialistic society, time drives our daily routine and determines much of our financial well-being. For military members, the notion of time or punctuality is even more critical; it is part of the training and discipline. A soldier or officer, who is not on time for an activity, event, or a military operation, risks a verbal reprimand or worse from his superior.

Afghans on the other hand do not abide by a “get things done” attitude, nor are they concerned about punctuality. Though Afghans have a good notion of time and the time of day, they frequently display poor time management skills.⁴³ Further, Afghans are more concerned about the interpersonal relationships and etiquette than following agenda items.⁴⁴ U.S. Army Col Scott Mackenzie, when discussing the fundamentals of working with Afghan security forces stated, “Drinking tea and socializing is a fundamental part of Afghan culture that should not be rushed by an overbearing and impatient mentorship approach. Be thoroughly prepared for every session so that you can expertly weave in business around the social rhythm of your counterpart.”⁴⁵

It can be very frustrating at times for counterinsurgents working with Afghans, especially when they have agreed to a specific timing for an important meeting or event, and the Afghans do not show up or arrive much later than planned. Afghan events have a tendency to occur late or not at all and rarely according to a set schedule. In fact, some U.S. Army officers have used this idea against the Afghans when trying to get a point across: “Yelling and screaming sends the

⁴³ Mackenzie, 17.

⁴⁴ Bryan R. Christensen, (Maj, U.S.AF), *The Weight of Culture in Nation Building*, MMAS, CGSC Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2007, p 23.

⁴⁵ Mackenzie, 22.

wrong signals to Afghans, as they will believe you are losing your sanity. If you wish to make a point, fail to show up to a planned meeting. Afghans will understand the nuances associated.”⁴⁶

Counterinsurgents should learn to allow for the notion of Afghan time in their work. They need to be patient, and to understand the Afghans' perceptions and notion of time. They need to let the Afghans work according to their own schedule and at their own rate and accept the cultural differences. In doing so, they will build stronger relationships and help break down cultural barriers.

Methods of communication

Another aspect of Afghan culture which counterinsurgents should adopt is their methods of communication, both physical and verbal. The Afghan male culture is a very physical one. Afghan men will often be seen holding hands, hugging, kissing, holding their hand over their heart, stroking another man's beard, or displaying other signs of affection. Many of these acts have strong homosexual connotations for western counterinsurgent forces. Because of *purdah*, the practice of preventing men from seeing women, the homosexuality rates in Islamic countries are much higher than in westernized societies. This is only natural, as both boys and men are rarely in contact with women, and constantly in contact with each other. The fact that Afghan weddings are expensive, and that few Afghan males can afford the dowry for a spouse only serves to exacerbate the situation. Consequently, homosexual activities are more common and widespread. Some Afghan men even go to some length to look more effeminate, such as wearing more tight fitting clothes, wearing flowers in their hair, and painting dark lines and highlighting their eyes.⁴⁷ In some cases, there has been infighting between men caused by jealous tendencies

⁴⁶ Interview with MAJ Thomas Clinton, interview conducted by MAJ Conrad Harvey from the Operational Leadership Experiences Project, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 12 March 2007, 14.

⁴⁷ Seierstad, 167; On one weblog (“The Taliban, representation and culture: or reading the other”) author Ciarán Swan argues that there are practical uses of the eyeliner and mascara: “kohl is used by men

for another Afghan boy or man. Though many Afghan men may practice homosexuality with other males, many of them are also married and have large families.

During their regime from 1996-2001, the Taliban banned homosexuality: “being suspected of any illicit sexual activity, prostitution, pornography, homosexuality, or an extra marital affair, (far less for being actually caught indulging in any such activity), littering, drunkenness, spitting, or gambling, could each result in very severe consequences.”⁴⁸ The consequences were often fatal. Since the downfall of the Taliban, homosexuality has returned as an accepted practice and cultural norm, at least tacitly. The research material also indicated that the situation is worse in Kandahar. “In Kandahar an ancient ethnic custom seemed to become more public after the fall of the Taliban. This is where an adult man, the ‘*Pashtuns*’ selects a young teenage boy, the ‘*Ashna*’ and gives the teenage boy money or gifts in exchange for sexual favors. This form of prostitution seems to flourish in Kandahar due to the poverty of the teenagers and the fact that there are strict social taboos about single men mixing with women. In fact, the government had to enact a law that banned Afghan soldiers from having their ‘ashna’ live with them. Yet, the national criminal code provides harsh sanctions for anyone convicted of sexual conduct outside of a legal marriage.”⁴⁹

Many coalition members who have served in Afghanistan have commented on the homosexuality which appears rampant in certain parts of the country.⁵⁰ In one instance, a British

throughout the Middle East, this use can be both aesthetic and pragmatic in that it protects against grit and against the glare from the sun.”

⁴⁸ “Poland to send even more troops to Afghanistan,” The Beatroot.com (September 14, 2006) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_rights_in_Afghanistan (accessed October 22, 2008); “Afghanistan Country Review,” CountryWatch.com (2008), <http://lumen.cgsccarl.com/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=27899390&site=ehost-live> (accessed November 12, 2008).

⁴⁹ “LGBT Rights in Afghanistan” www.wikipedia.com http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_rights_in_Afghanistan (accessed November 3, 2008).

⁵⁰ Afghan Commander AAR Book (OEF-7), 123.

marine returning from Afghanistan in early 2002 stated, “We were pretty shocked. We discovered from the Afghan soldiers we had with us that a lot of men in this country have the same philosophy as ancient Greeks: ‘a woman for babies, a man for pleasure.’”⁵¹

Despite their closeness, not all Afghan men are homosexuals. Males who have not seen each other for long periods often greet each other by a kiss on the cheek or even the lips. Linking arms or holding hands while walking or talking is a common sign of friendship for Afghans.⁵²

One blogspot, worth relating here, described a hierarchy of greetings, a graduation of the steps of physical contact:

When you get to know an Afghan, it all starts with a handshake. The single handed handshake of American business associates is the standard, although many Afghans don't have a lot of grip to it. However, to Afghans, handshakes are mandatory. To not offer a hand; or to not accept a proffered hand, is practically hostile. Stage two of a developing friendship is signified by the two-handed handshake, or the handshake with the forearm clasp. Stage three is the handshake with chest bump type hug over the clasped hands. Stage four is the full hug... either a handshake going into a two-armed hug or just straight to the hug. Stage five is the full hug with touching cheeks. Stage six is the full hug, touching cheeks, and a kissing noise. Stages five and six are very uncomfortable for Americans. It requires conscious acceptance. Stage seven is holding hands. An Afghan may skip stages and go straight to stage seven. Stage seven is the most challenging of all for an American. It is just plain uncomfortable to hold hands with another man; but it doesn't mean the same thing here as it does in the United States, obviously. It is the highest compliment that an Afghan can pay you. It is an act of friendship and trust that surpasses all others. Then there is the full on bear hug. It is universal, transcending all languages. It says, like nothing else, ‘man, it's really good to see you!’⁵³

The intent of this paper is not to suggest that coalition forces should replicate Afghan homosexual behaviors. Rather, it advocates understanding, accepting and replicating Afghan physical methods of communication, such as the bear hug, and the arm clasp, techniques

⁵¹ Unknown author, “Video: Gay is ‘OK’ in Afghanistan,” (March 9, 2008) <http://www.javno.com/en/world/clanak.php?id=130563> (accessed August 31, 2008).

⁵² “BDE & BN S5 Operations Roles and Functions,” 25 Infantry Division OEF Briefing Power-Point presentation (Date unknown), prepared by G-5 Civil Military Operations, obtained through Center for Army Lessons Learned, Fort Leavenworth, KS.

⁵³ Bill and Bob’s Excellent Adventure[pseud.] “Reunions and getting Short” Bill and Bob’s Excellent Afghan Adventure BlogSpot, Entry posted Friday, February 22, 2008, <http://billandbobsadventure.blogspot.com/2008/02/reunions-and-getting-short.html> (accessed August 31, 2008).

mentioned above for interactions with Afghans in order to break the cultural barrier and establish bonds of friendship. This author found it very uncomfortable the first time an Afghan National Army (ANA) general took him by the hand to go walking and talking together. The notion of holding hands with another man was bearable, however the knowledge that the author's troops were watching and snickering and would undoubtedly bring back the story to the unit was much more difficult to accept. Regardless, this author accepted the practice as a local custom and did not let his western upbringing affect his judgment. Counterinsurgents should understand the culture to understand the motivations behind such behavior. They should remain open-minded and unbiased and embrace the cultural differences for what they are.

In one case, U.S. embedded training team members were intolerant to Afghan physical abuse towards other Afghans: "Physical abuse was a redline. We did not tolerate physical abuse. That was difficult because a lot of these DRA [Democratic Republic of Afghanistan] guys were taught that way."⁵⁴ Once again, counterinsurgents tread a fine line between accepting Afghan customs for what they are and trying to change them for what they believe is best.

Counterinsurgents would also do well to adopt certain aspects of the Afghan verbal communications skills and become familiar and fluent with Afghan methods of negotiation. For instance, Afghans never start a discussion by going directly to the subject. They always start discussions or negotiations with a cup of tea (either unsweetened or overly sweetened) and polite conversation and discuss little or no business. They always start with other topics (families, current events, politics, etc.) and work their way slowly to the subject. In fact, Afghans usually prefer to get to know the individual they are talking to before engaging in any form of conversation that may lead to commitments. Relationships and respect are very important and Afghans often display pride over who and or what they know. It is, therefore, important that counterinsurgents get to know and develop relations with the Afghan people in their locality, a

⁵⁴ Clinton, 12.

process that usually takes a lot of time. It is also critical, when in a conversation with an Afghan, not to say anything negative about another Afghan unless you already know his feelings towards that person, as it may be a relation. A simple technique is to open the discussion with a neutral comment about the individual, and let the Afghan show his true colors first.

For the common Afghan, “Negotiation is more important than goal-setting; talking is more important than action”⁵⁵ This may be very frustrating for counterinsurgents, especially those with little patience or in a hurry for action or answers. Since counterinsurgents will conduct much of their verbal negotiations with the local elders, the *Maliks or Wakils*, they should show a genuine interest in what these wise men have to say and should be genuine and sincere in their intentions. They will often be able to obtain much more information about the local situation by acting thus, than if they act disinterested or too preoccupied with other affairs.⁵⁶

Counterinsurgents should also avoid using blunt refusals when dealing with the locals. It is much better practice and common in Afghan culture to leave possibilities open by stating: “I’ll see what we can do.” Afghans are also prone to heated debates that frequently appear to lead towards physical violence or even armed conflict. These are usually only a show of force, an Afghan means of expression. Afghans will often argue vehemently, and then embrace each other.

One U.S. Army officer was able to discern why it was that only the elders did all the talking at the *shuras* or *jirgas*. He found that it was because the younger Afghans lack verbal self-control and the ability to keep things succinct.⁵⁷ It is true that most Afghans have poor communication skills. In Col Scot D. Mackenzie’s paper on *Imperatives for Working with Afghan Security Forces*, the author comments on the Afghans’ communication skills and admits

⁵⁵ Powerpoint presentation, “Tactical Application of Culture: Soldier Guide for Afghanistan 2007, Rapid Training Tool”, Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Culture Center, Fort Huachuca, AZ, Produced May, 2006, Developer Christopher Dearing.

⁵⁶ Afghan Commander AAR Book (OEF-7), 110.

⁵⁷ Clinton, 7.

that they are “notoriously poor communicators; both written and oral.”⁵⁸ Again, counterinsurgents should understand and accept these limitations and should not let them become impediments to good working relationships. Verbal communication is an area where counterinsurgents can get frustrated easily and which can lead to tense and difficult situations. As mentioned previously, good negotiators and facilitators (and good interpreters) can help decrease tensions and can facilitate the positive exchange of information with the locals.

Most Afghans have an uncanny ability to memorize even the smallest details. This is because of their cultural heritage, their religion, the paucity of written historical documents, and the rate of literacy. Ever since childhood, and because of their inability to read, Afghans have been inculcated by the elders and Mullahs to memorize the verses of the Koran. A U.S. Army Major who deployed to Kabul in 2004 to train the Afghan National Army remarked, “I found it interesting that the soldiers who couldn’t read and write weren’t stupid. They had phenomenal memorization skills... when you told them something, they could hold on to it.”⁵⁹ Consequently, Afghan genealogies have been passed down from one generation to the next through word of mouth.

Some caution may be required when dealing with Afghans and their verbal skills. Afghan intentions may sometimes be motivated by personal gain or by the notion of *badal* (revenge). They will not hesitate to use any advantage or leverage that they have with counterinsurgent forces in order to resolve a family or local feud in their favor. Counterinsurgents should be watchful of this when building close relationships with one or more local leaders, elders or mullahs or even with Afghan locals.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Mackenzie, 17.

⁵⁹ Interview with MAJ Dan Williamson, interview conducted by Laurence Lessard from the Operational Leadership Experiences Project, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 7 December 2007, 10.

⁶⁰ Afghan Commander AAR Book (OEF-7), 110.

Afghan verbal and physical communications skills are therefore the last aspect of Afghan culture which if adopted can assist in creating bonds of friendship and help break down cultural barriers. Counterinsurgents would do well to act like Afghans in their greetings with them and to open and conduct their meetings and negotiations as Afghans would, by a first round of chitchat or social conversation before getting to the crux of the matter.

IS CURRENT U.S. ARMY CULTURAL AWARENESS TRAINING SUFFICIENT?

The U.S. Armed Forces have expended much time and money to enhance the cultural awareness for troops deploying to Afghanistan and the amount and quality of cultural awareness training has been steadily improving. This is largely due to the acknowledgement of the importance of cultural awareness and the consequent resources allocated (the U.S. Army and USMC cultural awareness centers for units deploying to Afghanistan and Iraq.)

In addition to these relatively new centers, which provide hands on unit training prior to deployment, U.S. Army members benefit from a variety of distance and online learning cultural training opportunities. Firstly, there is the online language training software (Rosetta Stone) which was mentioned previously which is available online at no cost and for a variety of foreign languages. Soldiers and officers can work on their own time to learn one or more these foreign languages for use in a future deployment or posting. The U.S. Army's TCC in Fort Huachuca, AZ, also offers cultural training packages and products for units preparing for deployment to Afghanistan. The Combined Arms Research Center in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas hosts an online Library that provides links to numerous online documents and websites relating to cultural awareness training that soldiers and officers alike can use for professional development. The Defense Language Institute (DLI) Foreign Language Center in Monterey, CA, provides a similar service with online resources and web links for cultural awareness training. It also provides pocket-sized basic language Survival Guides in various languages for soldiers or officers to learn the basics of a foreign language. Unfortunately however, it appears that the U.S. Army has done a less than adequate job of publicizing these resources to units and formations preparing for

deployments overseas, which, according to many, casts doubt as to the importance accorded to cultural awareness training by the U.S. Army.⁶¹

Much of the literature reviewed indicated that there was insufficient cultural awareness training for deployment to Afghanistan. For example, a majority of the participants attending the USMC Center for Lessons Learned-sponsored Foreign Military Advisor Conference in 2006 stated that the cultural awareness training they had received prior to deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan was insufficient and or of little relevance. Recent AARs reveal that troops deploying to Afghanistan find themselves much better equipped to deal with the locals than with earlier deployments. Though credit goes in large part to preparation given by the new cultural centers, it is also because for many soldiers and officers, it is not their first deployment. They are simply building on the cultural awareness experience that they gained in previous tours. The research also revealed some of the problems associated with the lack of sufficient cultural awareness training; in some instances, it has been a critical obstacle to mission success.⁶²

Also noticeable from the research was the fact that the levels (content and time spent learning) of cultural awareness training for the U.S. Army units going through the various Cultural Centers differ from one unit to the next. This is mainly because of the operational tempo of the various units but also a reflection of the training priorities set by individual unit commanders. In some cases, the cultural awareness training received a very low priority.⁶³

For the purposes of this monograph, the most appropriate means for determining whether current U.S. Army cultural awareness training is sufficient and relevant was to review those

⁶¹ Carolyn F. Kleiner, "The Importance of Cultural Knowledge for Today's Warrior-Diplomats," USAWC Strategy Research Project, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 200): 13.

⁶² Ben Connable and Art Speyer, "Cultural awareness for military operations," Paper presented at the Naval-Industry R&D Partnership Conference, Washington, D.C. (July 26-29, 2005): 2.

⁶³ Remi Hajjar, "The Army's New TRADOC Culture Center," *Military Review* (November-December 2006): 91.

reports and interviews of members having recently returned from theatre. A number of sources were used, principally the U.S. Army's Afghan Commander AAR Book (OEF-7), published in March 2007 by the U.S. Army's Center for Company-level Leaders⁶⁴. It provided detailed comments from over 43 Majors and a few senior Captains who deployed to Afghanistan from early 2006 to late 2007. Also collected, were interviews conducted by the Combat Studies Institute in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, as part of the Operational Leadership Experiences Project. These members, mostly Majors and LtCols, operated in Afghanistan for an average period of 15 months between 2001 and 2007 (see figure 1 for breakdown by rank). All of the officers interviewed acted as a company, troop or battery commander on the ground, though some commanded support units, or as an embedded training team member with the Afghan National Army. These officers were therefore, for the most part, in daily contact and negotiations with the locals. Eleven of them were from non-combat arms trades, such as Military Police, Ordnance, Medical, and Quartermaster, and, therefore, were not as frequently in contact with the local population (see figure 2 for breakdown by trade).

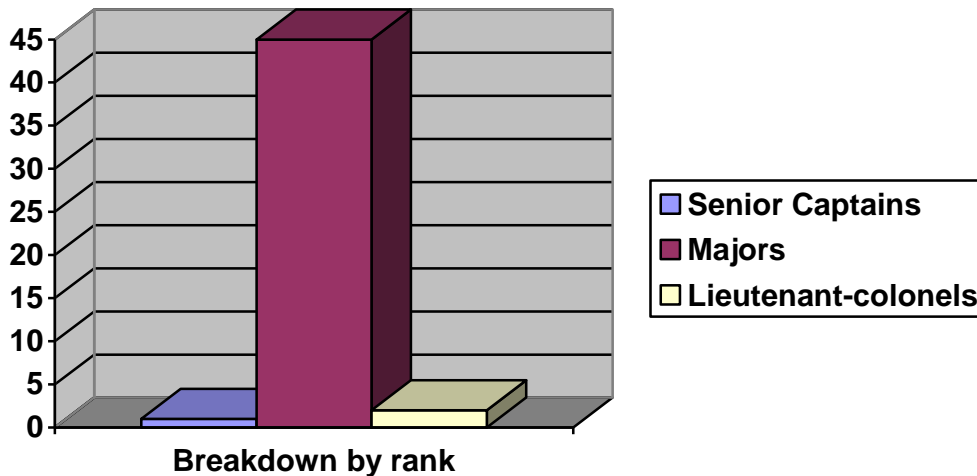


Figure 1: Interviewed officers classified by rank.

⁶⁴ Afghan Commander AAR Book (OEF-7).

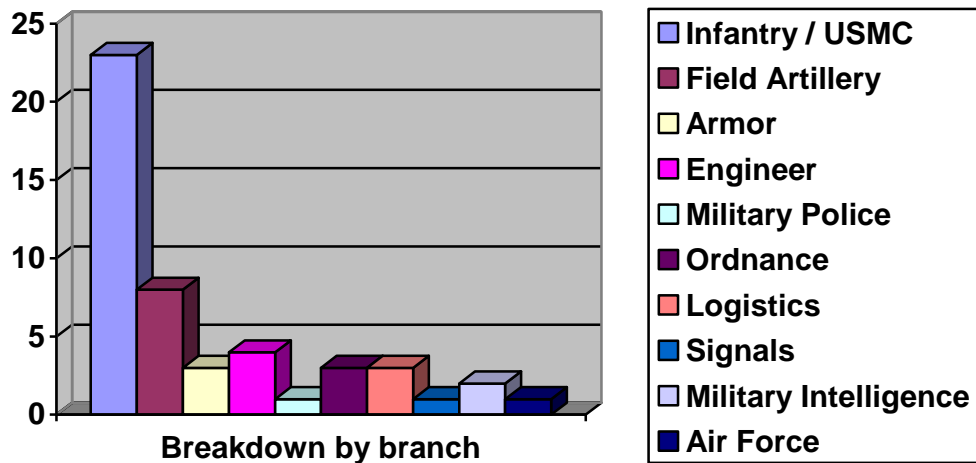


Figure 2: Interviewed officers classified by branch.

From the data researched, members were categorized into three groups, according to the comments they provided as to the relevance and adequacy of the cultural awareness training received prior to deployment. Of important note, in most cases, the interviewees did not ask these officers to comment specifically on this subject. Results shown, therefore, reflect comments offered freely from some of these officers as to the received cultural awareness training. Of the 51 members interviewed, only eight (8) acknowledged that the cultural awareness training was sufficient. Fifteen members stated that the cultural awareness training was insufficient or irrelevant. Of the other 28 members, though they had no specific comments as to the relevancy and adequacy of cultural awareness training received prior to deployment, though many had comments on how to improve the cultural awareness training prior to deployment to theatre. Figure 3 below highlights the results.

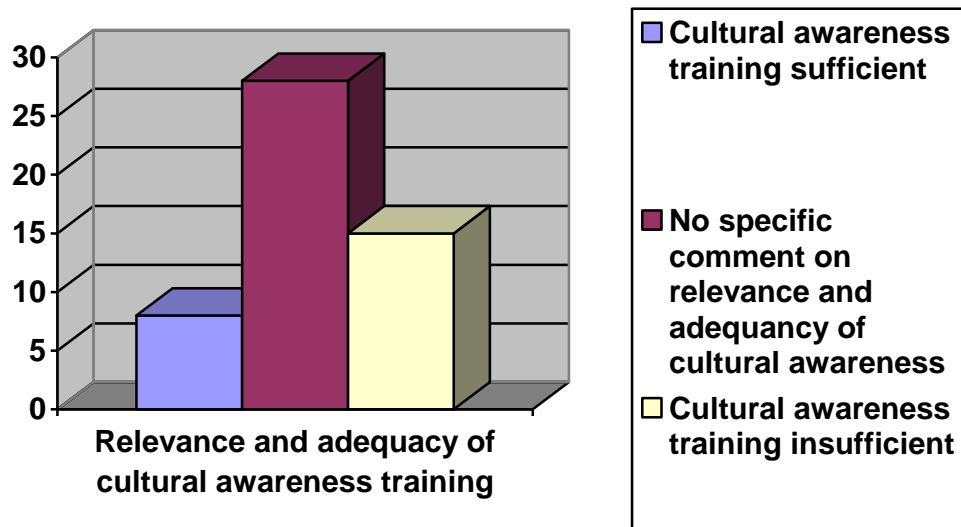


Figure 3: Results of interviewed officers as to the adequacy and relevance of pre-deployment cultural awareness training.

For those 15 members stating an insufficiency in cultural awareness training and for those 28 members recommending further areas of development, results were further subdivided into categories of training in order to identify specific recommended areas of training. Only those areas getting recommendations from two or more members were included in the table. Interestingly, out of the 43 members, ten of them recommended more in-depth language training, while eight recommended cultural awareness training focused on specific areas of deployment. The latter members' comments were to the effect that the cultural awareness training received was too broad and not specific enough for the province or area of Afghanistan to which they were assigned. Four members recommended more in-depth cultural training in general, four recommended more leader engagement training, and two suggested language training focused on specific individuals with natural language talents. Figure 4 below shows the results of the recommended areas of future training.

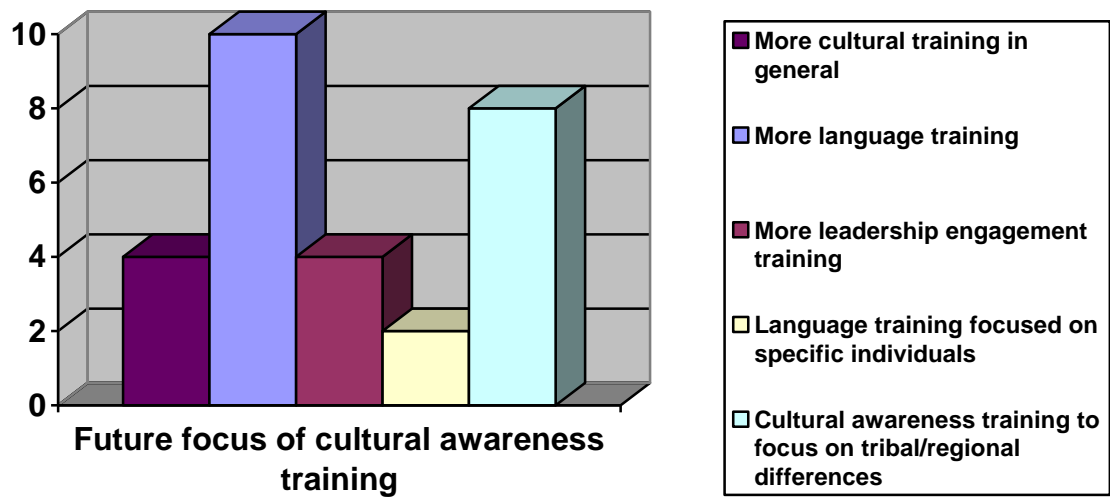


Figure 4: Recommended focus areas of future cultural awareness training.

CONCLUSION

Insurgencies have existed for centuries, and will continue to exist long into the future. Insurgents in past and current insurgencies have always relied on the people for survival. Without the support of the local population, an insurgent force finds itself without food, ammunition, medical care, a recruiting basin, intelligence, and moral support and eventually fades into obscurity. Counterinsurgency theorists agree that the side that best secures the support of the population (counterinsurgents versus insurgents) has the best chance of succeeding. Consequently, it is to the advantage of the counterinsurgents to win over the hearts and minds of the people as best they can. Winning hearts and minds includes breaking down the cultural barriers that impede the development of trusting mutual relationships. One way of breaking down these cultural barriers in Afghanistan is for the counterinsurgents to adopt some of the local Afghan customs and practices for their own. By learning the local language, by adopting the Afghan notion of time, by eating and sleeping among the locals, by adopting Afghan methods of communication, and by adopting the Afghan notion of honor and hospitality, counterinsurgents can develop long-standing bonds of friendship and trust with the locals and help alienate and possibly even isolate the insurgent movement. Without the support of the locals, the insurgency is doomed to failure. This is not, however, an advocacy for going native. Both Afghans and Westerners have their own distinct culture; they need to understand and respect each other's and work together to repel the insurgent movement. Counterinsurgents must find a way to live among the Afghan people and to adopt aspects of their culture which can assist them in their mission. However, they should not try to mimic or become Afghan, nor should they try to change Afghan culture to suit their needs.

Though the U.S. Armed Forces have taken significant steps to improve the adequacy and relevancy of cultural awareness training through the creation of its new centers (TCC and

CAOCL), the results show that there is still room for improvement. American troops returning from Afghanistan have expressed the desire that future cultural awareness training focus more on language skills, on tribal and regional differences, and on leadership engagements. Cultural awareness training should also be a continuous process and should start early in a service member's career.

Recommended areas for future research in the subject of cultural awareness should focus on the effects of prolonged Western influence due to long-term deployments of counterinsurgent forces on Afghan culture. Similarly, future research should center on the effects of the Soviet-Afghan war and the fall of the Taliban on Afghan culture. Millions of Afghan refugees have and are returning to their native country after several years abroad. Many are bringing with them cultural aspects, traits and or customs of the foreign country they survived in, and there are indications that these are having a significant impact on Afghan culture. Another interesting research area would be in the divergences between Western and Afghan culture. In other words, where do these cultures clash and where are the legal issues? For example, should counterinsurgents intervene in a case of *badal* where an Afghan man acts within his rights and according to local Afghan law to seek revenge on another Afghan? These and other friction points between the two cultures would make an interesting case study. Lastly, there needs to be an in-depth study conducted on the adequacy and relevancy of current U.S. Army cultural awareness training. Because of time and space limitations, this paper addressed the problem summarily. The determination of adequacy and relevancy of cultural awareness training should be the focus of a serious study in the form of surveys, unit post-deployment interviews, and other means, with specific questions on the pre-deployment cultural awareness training for forces returning from Afghanistan. Only by better culturally preparing our soldiers and officers' for Afghan deployments can they efficiently succeed in breaking down the cultural barriers and connect with the people, a measure which may lead to the downfall of the insurgent movement.

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